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Towards Openness / Open ReAction

The uncompleted project of Modernism and its living tradition in contemporary China

Li Hu and Huang Wenjing, *Towards Openness*
San Francisco, Applied Research & Design, 2017
Pb ISBN 978-1-940743-22-6
pp. 287, illus

ReAction
By Li Hu and Huang Wenjing
Beijing, China Architecture & Building Press, 2015
Pb ISBN 978-7-112-18064-6
pp. 245, illus

A double reading of two books from OPEN Architecture—their first Chinese monograph, *ReAction*, published in 2015, and their first English monograph, *Towards Openness*, published in 2017—provides a consistent lens to explore the living tradition of Modernism and its potentially larger, uncompleted and reinvented Chinese project.

Li Hu and Huang Wenjing, the co-authors of the books *ReAction* and *Towards Openness*, and the co-founders of OPEN Architecture based in Beijing from 2008, belong to a new wave of architects whose educations and practices grew out of the Western system.¹ Very similar to the earlier generation of architects,² upon starting their own architectural practice in their homeland, they immediately found themselves in a large professional knowledge gap that had formed in the space between their ten years of practice in a developed, industrialized architectural industry in the U.S, and that of the more rapidly developing urban context that condition almost every architectural project in China.

This intellectual and professional gap is the object of their reflection at the beginnings of both books, each from an open conversation with the architect-authors (2015: 27; 2017: 14-15). While fundamental issues in Western architecture and design including construction techniques, material tectonics, daylight treatment, scale and proportion of the space, and their richness towards ‘adequacy’—issues which Li Hu, quoting Peter Eisenman, calls ‘necessity’ (2017: 11), and which had been the focus of both architect-authors’ previous practices in the U.S—this part of knowledge and production had to step back its priority in its translation to the Chinese context, though without losing its full relevance to the much more demanding, faster and larger-scaled urbanisation unfolding in almost every site of every Chinese city.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand how finding one’s feet on the ground is crucial for any new independent practice. The tough reality that state-owned design institutions have naturally dominated the booming architectural market in China spares little room for a practice to be guided by rhetoric or unrealistic ideals. Besides, challenges to control go hand in hand with opportunities to build, both of which constrain and cultivate a specific way of practicing architectural design with Chinese characteristics. The traditional carpenter-led master builder system has collapsed long ago; architects and their design work has been placed at a relatively lower part of the whole chain of production in the building industry, which itself forms a very inward-

looking, socially-exclusive system, without meaningfully addressing the real need from the user or striving to change society. Architecture in contemporary China has been reduced to a physical object, an image, or purely a decoration (2015: 28; 35).

This should be the intellectual foundation from which to read these two books from OPEN Architecture's design practice. The key term, 'open', in these two books and in their practice name, should suggest a more strategic way forward, rather than a recycled concept from elsewhere, including Chinese architectural history. Indeed, the open plan, or framework, has been a dominant paradigm across two thousand years' of Chinese architectural history—a tradition established in the dependence on walls and frames and based on the logic of timber tectonics instead of static stereotomics; a temporal-spatial order instead of a physical order; programmatic ambiguity instead of functional clarity; and social meaning instead of visual pleasure.

Nevertheless, for OPEN Architecture, the dominant issues in current China are the lack of public space and the lost sense of civic urbanity in a 'sea of urbanisation', to paraphrase from Pier Vittorio Aureli (2011: xi). This is partly a historical legacy, as claimed by Li Hu (2017: 271-272), and partly a by-product of the accelerated urbanism which has been largely driven by the country's unique state financialisation mechanism and hegemonic real estate force. It is this crisis of neo-liberal production of contemporary Chinese cities and the gap between the reality of daily practice and the disciplinary ambitions of architecture that catalyses the shared intellectual structure of both *ReAction* and *Towards Openness*.

Six fundamental ideas, or themes, 'OPEN city', 'OPEN community', 'OPEN system', 'OPEN nature', 'OPEN institution', and 'OPEN future' are identified in both books, in order to define and reframe key projects of OPEN Architecture over the past ten years. Each theme is a solo presentation of a selected project with rich visual materials ranging from the architect-authors' design sketches to users' inhabitation photographs. All thematic projects then constitute a larger, collective project of OPEN Architecture for the city in China within current modes of extreme urbanisation. The subtle but important difference between the two books is the presentation sequence of the six themes and differently associated exemplar projects, partly as some of the projects understandably overlap two or more themes⁸ and partly because some projects, like UCCA Dune Art Space (Fig. 1, 2), were completed during the gap years between the two books. This seemingly accidental adjustment of the project's thematic attachment and sequential presence in the two books clearly reflects the intellectual progressing of OPEN Architecture and their hesitation for an expression of architecture in the printed form, rather than the built, which they are more bound to and familiar with.

Both books follow the architect-authors' vision of 'let the architecture speaks for itself' (2017: 13) with sketches, drawings, photographs composing the dominant part of the books, supplemented with thought-provoking texts from either architect-authors or academic critics. In total, all the built projects and many more unbuilt proposals collected in these two books demonstrate OPEN Architecture's consistent vision of the transformative power of an urban architecture and their coherent approach to transform the lives of the people who will inhabit the spaces they design from the inside-out. That's the reason why plans and sections are still the key generator of those projects by OPEN Architecture. This can be evidenced by many working drawings of

OPEN Architecture from early pencil sketches, like those of the Gehua Youth and Cultural Centre (Fig. 3, 4)—one of the earliest built projects which put OPEN Architecture on the national map—which gradually develop the project's subtle spatial relationship between the youth amphitheatre and central courtyard topography, to a series of sectional axonometric diagrams that narrate the stories imagined to emerge from those intermediate spaces in the 'Garden School' (Fig. 5, 6)—the Beijing No.4 High School Fangshan Campus—one of the major projects which won international praise for this rapidly-established practice.

Amidst all the completed buildings featured in these two books remains a degree of monumentality in external form and structure, clearly inherited from, and paying tribute to, those masters from the heroic times of Modernism.¹⁰ But as long as views and photographs showing the journey of stepping inside can reveal, the ordinary users with their ordinary daily moments have always been at the centre of OPEN Architecture's work, captured in delicately and sensitively designed details, such as the door handles and the vertical fins of balustrades.

With this in mind, one can really open her mind to the ideas and projects presented by OPEN Architecture in *ReAction* and *Towards Openness*. Instead of a point of entry, *ReAction* and *Towards Openness* offer a point of departure from which to interpret the journey of OPEN Architecture. And instead of two versions of a past design portfolio, *ReAction* and *Towards Openness* present a forward-looking, strong and coherent manifesto.

In this manifesto, the passionate author-architects clarify their fundamental belief in an architecture that is not just a physical object in the environment; rather, architecture is something with much larger form, which is more transformative and more powerful in shaping the lives of people and society more broadly. The charismatic author-architects also acknowledge how much they have learned from the socially-minded spirits of Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé (2017: 10-11; 2015: 25), as well as their subsequent generations of followers all around the world. This legacy has shaped the way OPEN Architecture's design aims to achieve a true openness in architecture and in cities, even despite their conscious awareness that it might not yet arrive so easily.

As admitted by Li Hu, the chance in current China to realize an 'urban-scale open architecture' has always been rare, a matter of fortune, even sometimes accidental;¹² it is only by realizing more and more 'open architecture' that Chinese cities can approach that 'as-yet-unrealized ideal state' of human existence (2017: 12), 'a city of generosity' (2017: 272). Undoubtedly, it would never be a smooth or peaceful transition from traditional the Chinese architectural system to a more transplanted and blended Modernism. Eventually, China may overcome this painful transition in its architecture and city planning. But, by then, too many fake and dysfunctional Modernist buildings and cities will have been built, the resources to realize them will be severely used up, and the reluctance for social change as well as gaps in trust between society and architectural professionals will remain. The priority, then, must be not only benchmarking another feasible version of Modern Architecture in the Chinese context, but also establishing an open, engaged architectural design approach, one like OPEN Architecture's that the projects and texts in these two books lay out. This will be opening an opportunity to confront strongly and strategically the emerging Chinese urbanism, which has borrowed samples from the more established Western urbanisms yet unfortunately in a piecemeal way.

Lars Lerup, who was Li Hu's mentor at Rice University, concluded at the end of *Towards Openness*, that 'OPEN's projections under the rubric of distance are provocative in their suggestion that modern Chinese architecture should neither be borrowed from the urban sceneries of the Western city nor derived from some distant pagoda or a Beijing hutong, but emerge from the very landscape in which urbanization takes place.' (2017: 259) Clearly seen from the dialogical issues on the city, nature, building systems and on the future in both *ReAction* and *Towards Openness*, the two architect-authors have seen an intellectual connection between the Eastern and Western architectural traditions and cultures beyond merely opposing binaries. And their OPEN Architecture practice has carved out a vast intellectual territory overlapping the contemporary rapid urbanisation in China and modernist architectural traditions from the western worlds. They recognize the inappropriateness and meaningless of any architectural attempts to frame one within the other, by holding the intellectual value and belief in a more 'open' architectural engagement between the city and its citizens. The architectural design approach of OPEN Architecture has actually been informed by this openness to the intersections between the East and the West, between the single architecture and its engaged city at large, between the built environment and its ordinary people's lives. In this way, these two books demonstrate a conceptual and strategic approach to modern and contemporary architecture in Chinese urbanism—an approach that has long been masked with ideological and cultural baggage. More importantly, they provide a comparable lens to reinterpret the incomplete project of Modernism and its possible reinvented tradition in contemporary China.

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Images



Figure 1 UCCA Dune Art Museum, bird eye of the building which is hidden in the existing sand of the seaside site.

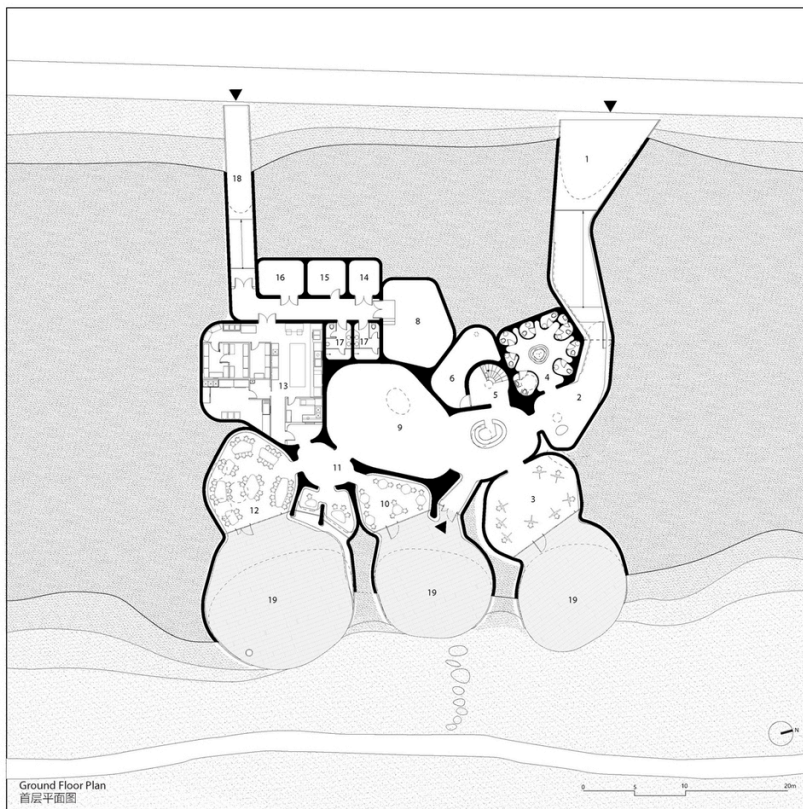


Figure 2 UCCA Dune Art Space, underground floor plan illustrates the organic connection between each cell of the whole.



Figure 3 Gehua Youth and Cultural Centre, internal view to the courtyard from the performance theatre is enhanced through folder walls.



Figure 4 Gehua Youth and Cultural Centre, the steps and balustrades' details echo the early spirit of high modernism.



Figure 5 Garden School, birds eye of the interconnecting campus buildings and interweaving landscapes.

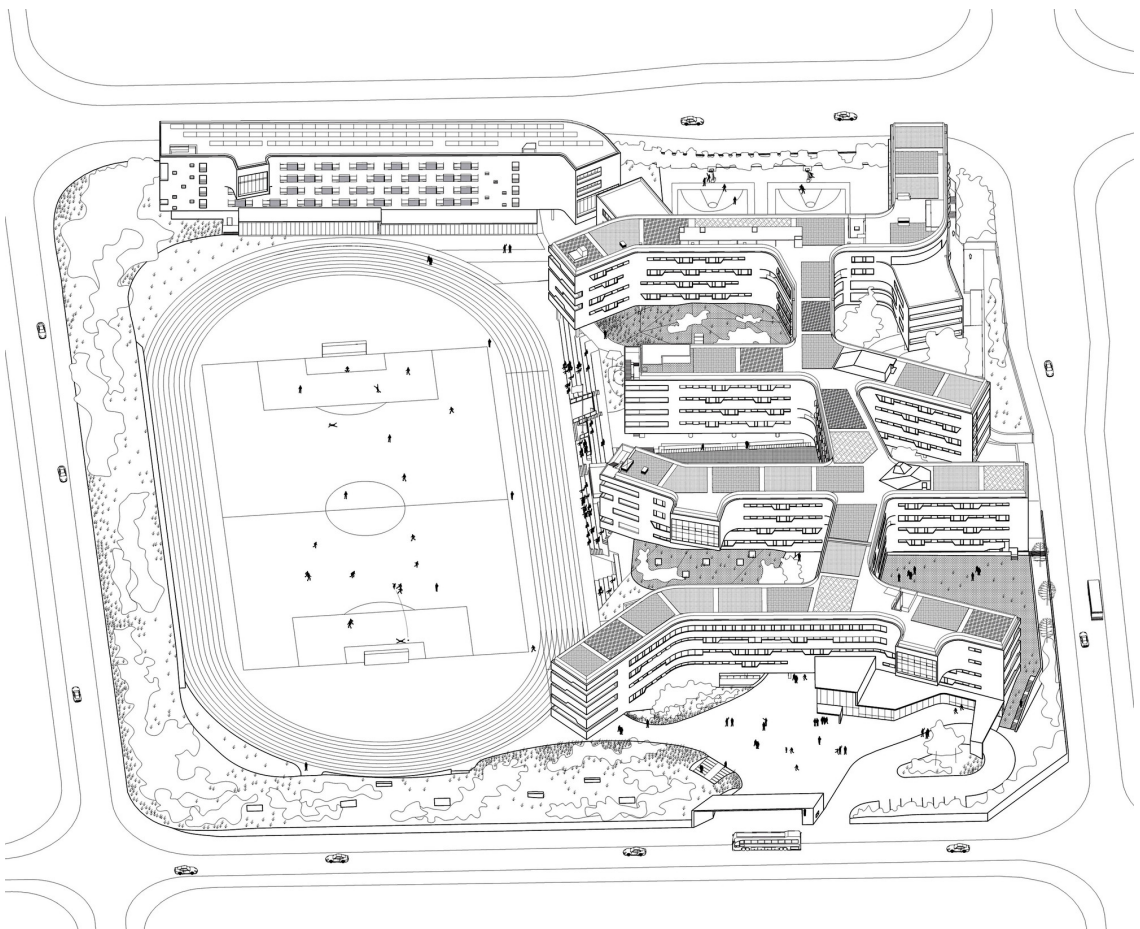


Figure 6 Axonometric drawing of Garden School, breaks away the normative typology of educational building in China, by making its building as a landform and a social condenser.

¹ The first generation of Chinese architects refers to those who returned to China to teach and practice after their professional training in the West during the early twentieth century, mostly from the United States. This includes Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin, Yang Tingbao, Tong Jun, just name a few. This generation would become leaders in the discipline and profession after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. As for the authors, Li Hu graduated from Rice University in 1998 and then worked with Steven Holl Architects for ten years. Huang Wenjing graduated from Princeton University in 1999 and worked for Pei Cobb Freed & Partners. They set up OPEN in 2008 in New York and soon thereafter moved the practice to Beijing.

² This generation includes, for example, Yung Ho Chang, who opened the first privately-owned, independent architectural practice, FCJZ, in China in 1993 after spending many years studying and teaching in the U.S. He was an important early mentor of Li Hu in the U.S.

⁸ For example, the Garden School project is moved from ‘OPEN community’ section in *ReAction* to the ‘OPEN nature’ section in *Towards Openness*; and the latest built Dune Art Space project replaces the Pingshan Drama Box in the ‘OPEN future’ section in *Towards Openness*.

¹⁰ From conversations between the author and Li Hu at HKW, Berlin, October to November 2015.

¹² From the conversation between the author and Li Hu at the office of OPEN Architecture, Beijing, April 2016.